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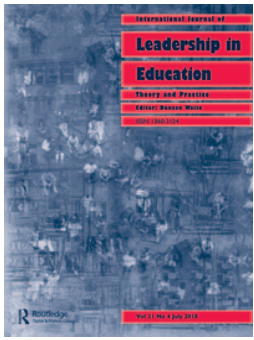
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Collaborative learning from personal cases in a principal preparation programme

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ABSTRACT

Existing preparation programmes for school principals have been widely criticized for failing to prepare their students adequately for their future roles. This study investigated a workshop at a principal preparation programme which focused on collaborative learning from personal real-life cases, exploring its potential contribution to the professional development of aspiring principals. Using qualitative methodology, we investigated 99 journal entries written by 12 aspiring principals who had participated in such a workshop. Data analysis revealed three benefits of this way of learning: (1) developing a multidimensional view; (2) acquiring applicable knowledge; and (3); nurturing the ability to doubt. Analysis suggests that collaborative learning from personal cases may be an appropriate pedagogical approach for principal preparation programmes; however, there are some concerns worthy of attention.

Introduction

School principals' effectiveness, which is crucial for improving student achievements (Coelli & Green, 2012; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Soehner & Ryan, 2011) and constitutes a key factor in school change (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Lai, 2015), is highly dependent on the quality of principals' preparation experience (Baker, Orr, & Young, 2007; Hernandez, Roberts, & Menchaca, 2012). Therefore, Orr (2011) claimed that 'leadership preparation has become one of this decade's primary approaches to educational reform and improvement of student achievement' (p. 115). In other words, 'if there is a national imperative to improve our failing schools, then there is also a national imperative to strengthen the preparation of school leaders' (Parylo, 2013; Wallace Foundation, 2008, p. 11).

Nevertheless, scholars have expressed their doubts as to the sufficiency of traditional approaches in preparing and licensing principals, claiming that current principal preparation programmes do not produce qualified educational leaders who are capable of running schools successfully (Drago-Severson, Blum-Destefano, & Asghar, 2013; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004). One of the main arguments regarding preparation programmes is that the methods of teaching used in them are overly didactic and not sufficiently interactive. The programmes lack high-quality learning opportunities and

student-centred instruction, which focuses the responsibility of learning on learners (Hernandez et al., 2012; Hess & Kelly, 2007). In wake of the prevalent criticism on principal preparation programmes, various initiatives have been introduced (Weiler & Cray, 2012). Some of the characteristics of these initiatives, such as cohort groups and field learning (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), reflect shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred instruction.

This study investigated a workshop held as part of a principal preparation programme which involved collaborative learning from personal real-life cases. Each one of the sessions in this ongoing workshop began with a presentation by an aspiring principal. Aspiring principals described cases that were based on their professional life, in which significant leadership issues were faced either by a single educator, or by an educational team or a whole school as an organisation, presented in narrative form. Thereafter, an open discussion was held, allowing participants to express their views. After each session, these aspiring principals were asked to write their reflections.

The goal of this study was to explore the potential contribution of collaborative learning from personal cases during principal preparation programmes to the professional development of aspiring principals. This study may expand the current knowledge available regarding the professional development of aspiring principals during preparation programmes, contributing to the ongoing discussion on ways to improve these programmes.

Theoretical background

The theoretical background will engage in the three elements of collaborative learning from personal cases: (1) collaborative learning; (2) case-based learning; and (3) reflection.

Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is a setting in which individuals learn together. Unlike individual learning, collaborative learning involves a joint intellectual endeavour in which learners depend on and are accountable to each other, utilizing one another's resources in ways such as asking one another for information, evaluating one another's ideas and monitoring one another's work (FitzSimmons, 2014; Jones, 2015; Trentin, 2010). When compared to more traditional methods where students non-interactively received information from an instructor, collaborative learning demonstrated improved student comprehension, achievement, motivation and interpersonal relationships (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009; Pattanpichet, 2011; Zhu, 2012).

Principal preparation programmes offering opportunities to learn collaboratively may contribute to prospective leaders' ability to initiate collaborative learning among school teachers (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Hoffman, 2008), which is a significant factor in the teachers' professional development. Collaborative learning improves teachers' professional competence, enabling the creation of pedagogical knowledge (Cheng, 2009). Collaborative learning mechanisms were found to be positively related to both teachers' sense of collective efficacy and teachers' commitment to their schools (Schechter, 2008). Moreover, collaborative learning among teachers is important not only for the teachers themselves as professionals but also for schools as organisations. According to Louis (2006), schools' capacity for innovation and reform relies on their ability to collaboratively process, understand and apply knowledge about teaching and learning. To revise their existing knowledge and keep pace with environmental changes, schools need to establish structures, processes and practices that facilitate the continuous collaborative learning of all their members, demonstrating qualities of learning organisations, which continuously transform themselves (Senge, 2006).

Furthermore, practicing collaborative learning during principal preparation programmes is crucial since today's leaders do not impose externally conceived values, but rather work to establish joint meanings and values that respect various cultural assets and voices. They lead from the centre rather than from the top, and concentrate on posing core questions, rather than imposing predetermined solutions (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Leaders have to abandon the heroic management stance

of knowing all, being all and doing all. Instead of providing the right answers, leaders are obligated to search for the right questions through a collaborative process (Schechter, 2013). Thus, acquiring special expertise or technique is valuable but not sufficient for an educational leader; a leader engaging in a collaborative learning process may serve as the group facilitator, who explains the process and moderates the discussion towards shared group action.

Case-based learning

Collaborative learning can be applied through case-based learning, in which students discuss complex, real-life situations involving a dilemma or an uncertain outcome. The case is presented in the context of the events, people and factors that influenced it, enabling students to identify closely with those involved (Ellet, 2007). This method enables students to understand the relationship between theory and practice (Hansen, Ferguson, Sipe, & Sorosky, 2005); thus, it is appropriate for disciplines in which real-life examples can be used to contextualize theoretical concepts (Breslin & Buchanan, 2008), such as medicine (Thistlethwaite et al., 2012), business (Erzurumlu & Rollag, 2013) and ethics (Dow et al., 2015).

Case-based learning can be considered as a method embedded in constructivism because students make meaningful connections between their prior knowledge and the case contents (Martin, West, & Bill, 2008). Constructivism perceives knowledge neither as truths to be discovered nor as an independent entity which is directly transmittable from person to person. Rather, knowledge consists of emergent, developmental, non-objective constructed explanations (Pelech & Pieper, 2010). Personal (cognitive) constructivism focuses on the intrapersonal process of individual knowledge construction, while social constructivism emphasizes the central role of the social environment in learning. These two variants may be seen as complementary perspectives of the learning process (Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Therefore, from the constructivist perspective, learning new concepts in a decontextualized form is hardly beneficial or effective compared to learning them through application in authentic situations (Marlowe & Page, 2005), where a meaningful context exists (Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Educational research has shown case-based learning to be a useful pedagogical tool. It enables the implementation of active learning strategies, rendering learning more effective (Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2012; Choi & Lee, 2009; Kim & Hannafin, 2009). It is also an interactive strategy which shifts the emphasis from teacher-centred to more student-centred activities, promoting autonomous learning. Case-based learning has also been linked with increased student motivation and interest in the subject being learned, providing an opportunity for the development of transferable key skills, such as communication, group work, information gathering and analysis, problem-solving, time management and presentation skills (Backx, 2008). It also encourages the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, requiring the practice of skills such as information retrieval, selection, analysis and synthesis (Duncan, Lyons, & Al-Nakeeb, 2007).

Reflection

Typically, case-based learning uses written cases which were prepared in advance specifically for this purpose, according to a structured format. However, the current study explores case-based learning which involved reflection on personal cases, with each participant presenting a case to the group and hearing the other participants' responses and reflections on her actions. In addition, all aspiring principals were required to write a weekly journal entry about their collaborative learning experience.

The term 'reflection' means not only looking back on past actions and events, but rather taking a conscious look at emotions, actions and responses, and using the emergent information to reach a higher level of understanding (Paterson & Chapman, 2013). Reflection is more than thinking about something; it means delving into a much deeper level of thought that prompts specific actions (Coffey, 2014). Enabling professionals to learn from experience both about themselves and about their work,

reflection facilitates questioning personal behaviours and challenging ideological illusions as well as social and cultural biases (Bolton, 2014). Setting the stage for learners to identify conclusions derived from specific experiences, reflections may determine courses of action for achieving certain objectives (Chitpin, 2006).

Educationally speaking, the reflective practice entails the cognitive process of thinking about and monitoring one's actions in conjunction with considering the existing knowledge about education with the aim of achieving continued improvement (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005). Reflection can be an effective tool for aspiring principals to develop and hone their skills for 'doing and analysing what they do' (Pedro, 2006, p. 132). More specifically, embedding reflection in principal preparation as a leadership strategy approach is a possible way to nurture these future school leaders' self and co-regulatory capacities (Michaksky & Schechter, 2013). However, the current accountability requirements extant in most educational settings may lead aspiring principals to reflect on the more technical aspects of their leadership practice (Nagle, 2009).

Method

Participants

The population studied was students enrolled in a principal preparation programme in a major research university in central Israel. All principal preparation programmes in Israel follow a similar curriculum, and are supervised and operated under the pedagogical guidance of the Capstone Institute that was appointed by the Ministry of Education to spearhead school principals' development. The programme consists of 250 h of academic study and 150 h of internship. For participation in a workshop that involved collaborative learning from personal cases, the aspiring principals were divided into 2 groups of 12 (participants were randomly assigned to each group). This study investigated one group of 12 aspiring principals, all women, with a mean age of 41 years (range: 32–53; SD = 6.1), and a mean of 17 years of teaching experience (range: 8–26; SD = 5.1). This group was selected based on the moderator's agreement to participate in the study. For ethical reasons, all participants were asked to provide written consent to our reading of their reflections, based on their understanding of the study's purpose. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Table 1 presents participants (pseudonyms) and their characteristics.

The workshop

At the workshop, which was held once a week, each session began with a student presenting a case based on her professional life. There were no specific rules or guidelines for presenting the case; the only requirement was that authentic and detailed information be provided, so that a collaborative analysis of the case may be undertaken. Workshop participants were invited to ask questions for further

Table 1. Study participants.

Pseudonym (Alphabetically)	Age	Education	Level of school	Position at school	Years of teaching experience
Barbara	40	BA	Elementary	Instruction coordinator	18
Dorothy	53	MA	High	Head of department	26
Elizabeth	41	MA	Elementary	Educational counsellor	10
Jennifer	32	BA	High	School principal	18
Linda	37	MA	Middle	Deputy principal	13
Lisa	36	BA	Elementary	Head of department	14
Margaret	40	BA	High	Year head	8
Nancy	41	MA	Middle	Evaluation coordinator	18
Patricia	44	MA	Elementary	Year head	21
Rebecca	52	BA	High	Head of department	26
Sandra	37	MA	Elementary	Year head	15
Susan	38	MA	High	Deputy principal	16

clarification when necessary. Thereafter, a discussion in a democratic spirit ensued, and participants were free to present their analysis. In the absence of specific instructions for proceeding, participants simply shed light on various aspects of the event, analysed its causes and offered resolution options, evaluating the alternatives and their implications. This workshop consisted of 18 sessions: an opening session; 16 case study sessions; and a closing session. Thus, most of the aspiring principals presented one case study and some presented two.

The sessions were led by a trained moderator, whose duty was to encourage students to share their experiences and jointly learn from issues likely to come up during their professional journeys. The moderator structured the sessions, handling group dynamics and enabling team learning. The skills and qualities of moderators included: flexible style, respect for others, neutrality, enthusiasm and conflict management. Since the moderator did not know the cases in advance, the insights provided by her stemmed from her extensive theoretical knowledge.

Data collection

After each session, the aspiring principals were asked to write journal entries describing what they learned from it on the emotional, cognitive and meta-cognitive levels; what they could apply from it to the process of their professional development; what came to mind during the session; and which additional insights they gained following later reflection. The journal entries were submitted through the course website. The aspiring principals wrote 3–13 journal entries each; in total, we explored 99 journal entries. The average length of each reflection was a page and a half.

Data analysis

Data analysis included three stages. The first stage was condensing: not all the data which were collected could serve the purpose of the study, so that a sorting process was necessary (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In this process, we sought the portions of data reflecting prospective principals' professional development resulting from the workshops, which was the subject of this study. This sorting was a thematic analysis, and not a content-analysis (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2007), because we focused on identifying explicit and implicit evidence of professional development rather than evaluate the frequency and saliency of particular words or phrases in the original data. The second stage of data analysis was coding, which is 'the action of identifying a passage of text ... that exemplifies some idea or concept and then connecting it to a named code that represents that idea or concept' (Gibbs, 2007, p. 148). In this stage, we marked each segment of data (utterance) with a code symbolically representing and capturing the aspect of professional development it expressed. This stage was data driven and not theory driven because we did not use a priori codes, but rather inductive codes that were developed by directly examining the data, grounded in the various perspectives articulated by participants (Flick, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After capturing the essence of utterances in the previous stage, the third stage of data analysis was categorizing, i.e. clustering data portions together according to similarity in order to generalize their meanings. It was like 'decorating a room; you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on' (Abbott, 2004, p. 215).

Findings

The goal of this study was to explore the possible contribution of collaborative learning from personal cases during principal preparation programmes to the professional development of aspiring principals. Data analysis revealed three benefits of such learning: (1) developing a multidimensional view; (2) acquiring applicable knowledge; and (3); nurturing the ability to doubt. The following sections will describe and demonstrate these benefits.

Developing a multidimensional view

Aspiring principals' journal entries revealed that the one of the benefits of collaborative learning from personal cases during principal preparation programmes was participants' development of a multidimensional view. Since each participant analysed the situations discussed from her own perspective, workshop participants developed a multidimensional view about school scenarios. Such a view entailed understanding that each element of the school context has more than one reason, explanation, implication or answer.

Elizabeth's case, for example, dealt with the relationship between the school principal and the PTA. During the workshop, participants described different types of principal-PTA relationships, raised a variety of factors to be considered and offered a wide range of practices. Jennifer learned from this presentation that there is more than one way to manage the relationship between the school and the PTA:

The Principal-PTA relationship is indeed a complex challenge and might even feel like a threatening nuisance for which one must be prepared. To my mind, there's no single correct answer, no one and only truth. What's right and works well in one place won't necessarily be effective in another place, and what's right and works well at a certain time won't necessarily be effective another time.

Jennifer was exposed to the complexity and multidimensionality of the relationship between the school and the PTA. This complexity frightened her a bit: it *might even feel like a threatening nuisance*; however, she learned that school principals managing a relationship with a PTA must adapt themselves to changing situations. Since the 'correct answer' varies according to time and place, principals need to be flexible. They cannot use the same strategy again and again, as they must adapt their practice to the specific given situation.

The reflection written by Patricia following Barbara's presentation also demonstrated the development of a multidimensional view. Presenting her case, Barbara described how, despite her devoted work, she was not awarded the school's outstanding teacher award. In her reflection, Patricia discusses the question of whether the principal should reward an outstanding teacher:

Is it good to reward an exceptional teacher? On the one hand, if an extra effort goes unnoticed, teachers will wonder why they should bother. On the other hand, crowning one outstanding teacher inevitably leaves other teachers disappointed. However, I learned from this recent discussion that both possibilities are true. They contradict one another, yet both are true. My actions must take both into account.

As many other school issues, rewarding outstanding teachers is a complicated one. The principal has to elevate morale and motivation among the staff, thus she should recognize extraordinary efforts and successes. At the same time, teachers who were not awarded also deserve recognition for their admirable work. Thanks to the discussion of Barbara's case, Patricia learned that she does not have to choose between two contradicting options. Instead, she has to broaden her view, considering various aspects simultaneously.

Towards the end of the workshop, Rebecca felt that the multidimensionality of the discussions enriched her. Therefore, she concluded that considering others' points of view is important:

Sometimes it's easy to forget that our own point of view is not the only one. During the workshop I understood that it's no use examining reality only from my own perspective. It's important to try and examine the situation from others' points of view as well. To automatically assume that the other's point of view is mistaken and that I'm always right would not lead to my development.

A multidimensional view means that more than several perspectives are accurate; the challenge is to be able to shift from one to the other, and then acknowledge that more than one answer is correct. Rebecca implied that she needed to shift her mindset in order to consider others' points of view. Prior to the workshop, she assumed that if she had to see things from others' points of view, she might need to give up her own. Thanks to the collaborative learning, Rebecca developed a willingness to see others' perspectives without abandoning her original one.

Acquiring applicable knowledge

One more benefit of collaborative learning from personal cases during principal preparation programmes was the acquisition of applicable, actionable knowledge. The workshop dealt with situations familiar to participants from their daily life at school rather than with abstract, theoretical concepts; thus, the situations discussed were embedded in authentic circumstances.

Jennifer, a beginning principal, described the transition process she underwent until she became accepted into the school. As a novice principal, Jennifer dealt with several challenges, such as overcoming fierce resistance on the part of her staff members. Barbara was well acquainted with a similar situation, and thus was able to learn from it:

For me, much can be learned from this case, because I am very familiar with a similar situation. Our principal has come a long way from the moment she took office, with all the difficulties that entailed, until the present time – when her successful accomplishments are visible. Since I am well acquainted with such a situation, Jennifer's case taught me a lot. I realized how important it is for a new principal to develop strong trusting relationships at school, despite potential conflicts with staff, parents, and community members. As a future principal, I'm sure I'll implement what I learned today.

Barbara felt that Jennifer's case was significant for her because she witnessed a beginning principal's similar process of socialisation. Barbara learned from this case that in the light of the potential tension between the new principal and various stakeholders, trust is an essential element in school relationships. Seeing herself as a future principal, Barbara considered this insight to be useful for her.

Linda depicted an offensive principal, who caused her to feel deeply hurt. Sandra noted that as a school middle leader, she could learn a lot from this case:

This case was very significant for me because as a deputy principal I have many relationships within the school. Contemplating this case I realized that sometimes I'm a bit aggressive, quick to attack or confront. I thought it expresses professionalism, but the discussion we held in class taught me that it is very important to be attentive and sensitive. You have to be determined and authoritative but at the same time you need to listen and understand. I'm sure that from now on I will work a little differently.

Before the workshop, Sandra associated a certain degree of aggression with professionalism. She thought that determination and authority are inconsistent with being attentive and sensitive. Since the discussion was about situations that she knew well from her daily work, she could alter her point of view. She believed that this change would reflect in her school relationships.

Elizabeth's familiarity with the relationship with external authorities enabled her to learn from Patricia's case, which dealt with such a relationship:

For me personally, as an educational counsellor, the main insight I derived from this case study was the importance of maintaining a correct and good relationship with the authorities. My work as an educational counsellor involves relationships with various authorities. Following Patricia's case I realized how important it is to coordinate expectations and work procedures in order to avoid ambiguous situations. I'm sure it will be of value to me when I'll be a principal.

Elizabeth linked her familiarity with the area of relationships with external authorities to her being an educational counsellor. Due to this familiarity, Patricia's case taught her how to manage such relationships effectively by coordinating expectations and work procedures. Elizabeth believed that this might help her both in her present role as an educational counsellor and in her future role as school principal.

Nurturing the ability to doubt

An additional benefit which prospective principals derived from collaborative learning from personal cases during principal preparation programmes was their ability to doubt what they had seen in the past as an indisputable truth, questioning their own professional perceptions and decisions. Aspiring principals learned to question their own views, work methods and interactions, considering possible alternatives.

The group discussion of Lisa's case, for example, enabled her to question her conduct in the context of her poor relationship with a new principal. Thanks to the support and sympathy she received from the workshop group, Lisa recognized her part in this relationship:

The feeling that all group members sympathize with me and support me was strong, and helped me listen and see myself by means of a sort of defamiliarisation – which was instructive to me as far as understanding my part in my relationship with the new principal. I realised that it is really not so certain that I acted appropriately and effectively.

Lisa was unable to see her own contribution to her poor relationship with her principal. She blamed the principal, finding it difficult to see her own part in the deterioration of their relationship. The group discussion which consisted of no blaming and attacking, but rather of supporting and understanding, allowed her to doubt her own behaviour: 'it is really not certain that I acted appropriately and effectively'. Susan also noticed that discussing Lisa's case actually enabled Lisa to doubt her previous course of action:

The group members' reflection illuminated new perspectives for Lisa, enabling her to engage in inner contemplation and try to understand which emotions she was bringing into her interaction with the principal. She succeeded in considering another option, which is absolutely not easy. However, it was important not only for her; we all learned from it.

According to Susan, Lisa could not have identified the emotions that interfered in her relationship with her principal without the help of the group. The supportive atmosphere and open discussion enabled Lisa to consider additional ways for managing her relationship with the principal, and by so doing, she also contributed positively to the whole group.

Following Nancy's case, Lisa wrote that thanks to the group discussion, it was obvious that Nancy was able to view a specific process of change from a broader perspective. Nancy had presented such a process which she herself had led, admitting that it resulted in feelings of loneliness and frustration. Lisa wrote:

It seemed that the colleagues' discourse in the group helped Nancy to question her own behaviour in the process of assimilating change in the teachers' room, following which she's been able to reframe the change in her mind.

Perhaps Lisa's personal experience of questioning her own behaviour helped her notice this process in Nancy's utterances. According to Lisa, the discussion enabled Nancy to question her own behaviour and change her approach.

Doubting previous perceptions was found to stem not only from the presentation of individual cases, but also from group discussions and reflective writing. For example, when Linda heard the case presented by Dorothy dealing with a conflict between the school principal and a 'rebellious' teacher, she doubted her perception about friendships among work colleagues, which she had developed throughout her years in school:

The case we dealt with in the workshop challenged my long-standing position, which is in favour of friendly ties beyond working relations with colleagues. Dorothy's school constitutes an extreme example illustrating how longstanding friendships and social ties can impair the organisation's functioning. In this case, there's no doubt that the principal's response was influenced by his former friendly relationship with the 'rebellious' teacher.

Linda found the root of the problem in the case described by Dorothy to be the friendly relationship between the principal and one of the teachers. According to Linda's interpretation, the teacher took advantage of the relationship and allowed himself to challenge the principal's status; for the same reason, the principal responded ambiguously. Therefore, Linda questioned her former position favouring friendships within the school.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the possible contribution of collaborative learning from personal cases during principal preparation programmes to the professional development of aspiring principals. Through qualitative data analysis, three benefits of this collaborative learning were identified.

The first benefit was the development of a multidimensional view. The ability to maintain a multidimensional view is also one of the characteristics of systems thinking in school leadership (Shaked & Schechter, 2014). Systems thinking can be explained succinctly as a holistic approach which puts the study of wholes before that of the parts; it does not try to break down systems into parts in order to understand them, but rather concentrates on how the parts function in networks of interaction (Gharajedaghi, 2011; Senge, 2006). One of the characteristics of systems thinking applied in school leadership is a multidimensional view, which involves perceiving several aspects of a given issue simultaneously, that is noticing a wide range of reasons for its emergence and existence, taking into account a variety of its consequences, and predicting various options for its future development (Shaked & Schechter, 2014). The multidimensional view was developed among the aspiring principals in this research mainly due to their collaborative learning. Since each aspiring principal analysed the cases discussed from her own perspective, participants developed a multidimensional view about school issues. To the best of our knowledge, the contribution of collaborative learning to the development of a multidimensional view has not been mentioned in the existing literature.

The second benefit was the acquisition of applicable knowledge. As mentioned above, constructivism emphasizes the importance of learning within a meaningful context rather than abstract instruction out of context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Powell & Kalina, 2009). The study of new information as decontextualized knowledge is considered to be less effective than learning it by applying it in authentic situations (Marlowe & Page, 2005). In accordance with this perspective, we can understand the findings of the current study which indicate that aspiring principals expanded their knowledge when information was presented to them through grappling with authentic real-life situations. As mentioned above, case-based learning has quite a few benefits (Backx, 2008; Baeten et al., 2012; Choi & Lee, 2009; Duncan et al., 2007; Kim & Hannafin, 2009); however, this study presents the main benefit of the collaborative reflective approach to prospective principals as the acquisition of applicable knowledge.

The third benefit was nurturing the ability to doubt former positions and decisions. According to the constructivist approach, learners construct new knowledge through assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation means that learners take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into their existing set of ideas, while accommodation is when learners have to alter their pre-existing conceptual schemas to make sense of the new information (Haratsis, Creed, & Hood, 2015; Zhiqing, 2015). Assimilation may occur when the new information is aligned with the learners' pre-existing representation of the world, but may also occur as a failure to change a faulty representation. Findings of this study show that aspiring principals were able to challenge their pre-conceived professional perceptions: they overcame the natural tendency to modify the new information so as to fit it in with previously developed perceptions, changing internal mental structures to achieve consistency with external reality.

The reflections had a major role in allowing aspiring principals to question professional perceptions. Reflection enables us to doubt our premises regarding our work, behaviour and interactions, allowing us to reconsider and reshape our positions (Sherwood & Horton-Deutsch, 2012). It enables us to doubt professional beliefs, values and practices, challenging prevailing ways of action and questioning patterns of interaction (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005). With this said, aspiring principals need the opportunity to cast doubt on their pre-conceived mindsets, acknowledging the importance of reframing through collaborative discussion and reflection. The doubting process legitimizes aspiring principals' contemplation of problems neither as stigmatizing nor as signifying failure, but rather as challenges providing a valuable developmental opportunity for their leadership strategies (Helsing, 2007).

Overall, prospective principals indicated that they had learned considerably from one another during the workshop sessions. Thus, collaborative learning from personal cases may be worth considering for inclusion in principal preparation programmes. However, since in collaborative learning from personal cases most of the time is devoted to discussions among students, it may not provide prospective principals with an extensive theoretical knowledge on the topics at hand. Moreover, most of the cases presented during the workshop we explored dealt with interpersonal relationships. Apparently, this area was regarded by aspiring principals as carrying great importance. This might

raise concern as to the benefit of collaborative learning from personal cases since cases presented at the workshop do not always pertain to areas that are important for the success of school principals, distracting students from deliberating on core leadership issues which were already found to have great importance for the development of well-performing schools, such as instructional leadership. Collaborative learning from personal cases lacks theoretical perspective on 'what makes a difference' in the leading of learning activities. To address these concerns, prospective principals may be advised to link the cases they present to predetermined theoretical frameworks, thus sharing cases that are related to vital, high-priority knowledge and skills for school principals.

This study has provided new data compared to prior research; however, inasmuch as the findings were collected in a particular context, their cross-cultural validity is not proven. This study should be replicated elsewhere in various sociocultural contexts, enabling generalization of the findings to a broader population and substantiating their international validity. Further research should complement participants' written journal entries with additional objective measures to evaluate their development through collaborative learning from personal cases. Longitudinal research is needed to examine whether and how collaborative learning from personal cases contributes to their performance when they are appointed as school principals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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